

As August winds to a close, parents and children are getting ready to go back to school. In between buying supplies, trying on new clothes, and sorting out schedules, there is another important step to prepare - getting every child vaccinated. Making sure that school age boys and girls are up to date on their vaccinations isn't fun, but it's absolutely necessary for the public health and the health of the child. In recent years, there has been a resurgence of diseases that had once been all but eradicated. These diseases, such as measles and whooping cough, are more than just inconveniences and economic drains; they can cause lasting damage and even kill.

Most states, including New York, require children entering schools to be immunized against formerly endemic diseases, such as measles. Unfortunately, a growing number of parents are claiming exemptions from these requirements, putting not just their children at risk, but their entire community.

It is important that everyone who can get vaccinated does, because some people - like very young children, pregnant women, and the immune compromised - cannot get vaccines. By vaccinating as many people as we can, we create what is called "herd immunity." Herd immunity helps stop the spread of infections, and protects those who can't get vaccines.

In 2008, one quarter of those Americans who contracted measles - a potentially fatal disease - had claimed exemptions from vaccinations, but another quarter were too young to be vaccinated. This second group needed herd immunity to protect them from these dangerous diseases.

I know that many parents have heard stories about the dangers of vaccines. But rest assured that vaccines are as safe as they can be, and the risks that unvaccinated children face are far greater than the risks of the vaccines. No reputable study has ever found evidence that vaccines cause autism, and the rate of poor reactions to vaccines is extremely low.

I know how painful it is to get these shots, both for children and their parents, but the alternative is far worse. Vaccinations protect both our children and those who cannot protect themselves from diseases that no one wants to experience again. Please get your children vaccinated. If you have questions about where to get vaccination shots, or are worried about the cost, please contact the New York State Vaccines for Children program at nyvfc@health.state.ny.us or (800) 543-7468.

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